The Gothic Challenge to Victorian Realism: Buried Narratives in *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*

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Live burial, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, is intrinsically reflective of fiction, representing as it does another reality concurrent with the world of the reader but entirely inaccessible.(1) The Gothic aesthetic changes in the Victorian period when it encounters the conventions of realism: it goes underground as realist novels use Gothic traditions if not in their plots then in their figurative language. In turn, this resurfacing of the aesthetic calls into question the generic distinction between realism and Gothic literature. More specifically, the intervention of the Gothic in the silencing of (mostly female) characters through metaphorical live burials in Victorian realist novels expresses skepticism about possibilities of narrative mimesis, and this skepticism runs counter to and contends with the very strategies that are otherwise at work in realist texts. In this article I will examine three texts that demonstrate the complex relationships between canonical literature and popular Gothic forms and structures that persist throughout the century: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853),(2) Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856),(3) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).(4) The Gothic challenges the Victorian realist project, and many of the canonical authors of the nineteenth century were influenced just as powerfully by the Gothic tradition as they were by the realist one. This subterraneous influence, however, has often been obscured in favor of a history of realism that excludes genres associated with fantasy or romance.(5)

Through the limited perspective of its narrator, *Villette* repeatedly withholds from the reader any promise of certain knowledge, marking it as a text much more interested in obscuration than revelation—even to the extent that the narrator denies closure to her readers, pretending unwillingness to tell them the end of the story on its very last page. In *Villette* as in *Aurora Leigh* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, the Gothic motif of live burial signifies the inability of characters or narrators to communicate the truth.

To address the meaning of the Gothic in the Victorian period it is first necessary to reconcile two prevailing definitions of the genre: one that sees the Gothic as a literary-historical movement, and the second that sees "Gothic" as encompassing a set of identifiable conventions. Critics primarily interested in literary history have debated the appropriateness of using the label "Gothic" to refer to works written after 1820.(6) Others have used the term to address literature of any period that demonstrates attention to a few key themes. According to Sedgwick, the term "Gothic" is characterized by certain specific and frequently repeated conventions. By reading these conventions, critics such as Cannon Schmitt and Patrick Brantlinger can talk about a nineteenth-century Gothic, identifying, for example, the works of the Brontës as Gothic, though their novels do not specifically come out of the time period of the Gothic novel proper. However, merely labeling nineteenth-century works as Gothic is not helpful for deriving a literary history that explains how the Victorian Gothic works because it does not acknowledge the changes that occur in the literary trends. A middle ground must be found: we must be able to look at certain works of Victorian literature as a continuation of a Gothic tradition without making the two periods coterminous. As Schmitt argues, the Victorian Gothic "requires in turn a double solution: the recognition that a given genre functions differently both in relation to other genres and in relation to itself over time."(7) It does seem appropriate to talk about a Victorian Gothic, but with the awareness that this genre, like all genres, undergoes significant transformation over its long history.

The extent to which the Gothic does get incorporated into realist literature of the nineteenth century challenges the notion of a realist tradition and a Gothic counter-tradition. The nineteenth century shows a

tendency towards a unification of the realist viewpoint and its Gothic subversion. In the Victorian period, the Gothic becomes incorporated into realism in two different, but related ways. First, it gets updated to more modern settings and generally loses its supernatural elements, (as in the sensation novel). Second, it reimagines the terrors of the Gothic as metaphors.

As the Gothic novel changes into the nineteenth century's sensation novel there is a decreasing reliance on supernatural occurrences and an increasing reliance on mundane fears, such as crime.(8) In the nineteenth century, the source of Gothic fear is often institutional. Novels such as *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins and *Uncle Silas* (1865) by J. Sheridan Le Fanu interrogate the complicity of the law with Gothic villainy, even English modern law—the Gothic sensation tradition increasingly prefers crime to the supernatural, and current time periods to ancient ones. The second way that the Gothic changes is that it becomes less separate from realist literature and more frequently incorporated into it. The principal way in which the Gothic reappears in the realist novel is through a metaphorical reincorporation of its phantasmagoria and supernatural imagery in the language rather than in the plot. This is particularly notable in the "dark *Bildungsroman*," (such as *Jane Eyre*) where Gothic elements intermingle within the realist novel, which Carol Margaret Davison distinguishes from "the branch of the Victorian Gothic that lends credibility to the supernatural" such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.(9) When Gothic phantasms occur in the realist novel, they are likely to be in the imagination or psychology of a character. As George Haggerty notes, "Gothic form, then, is affective form" and reflects a "theoretical shift in interest from the object to the subject."(10) According to Robert B. Heilman, Charlotte Brontë's work is so powerful because it achieves a synthesis of passion and rationality through the incorporation of Gothic forms into the realist novel. (11)

One element of the Gothic that does not change, however, from the eighteenth- to the nineteenth-century Gothic, is its epistemological uncertainty and resistance to objective attitudes towards representation and knowledge. Caroline Levine has argued that suspense in the Victorian novel is a result of the period's acute interest in scientific empiricism:

…the unsettling pleasures of suspense—as they emerged in science, politics, and fiction—were new to the nineteenth century. Of course, fiction and drama had used suspenseful devices for centuries, and eighteenth-century Gothic fiction was famous for its chilling suspense. But Victorian suspense relied on the model of the scientific experiment, uniting its skeptical epistemology with anxious pleasure in order to teach readers to enjoy a new approach to the realities of the world that extended well beyond the popular fiction of the time. This vision of suspense was new precisely in its claims to widespread and serious significance.(12)

In contrast to Levine's analysis, in which suspense operates in the service of scientific knowledge, I would argue that the Victorian Gothic (like Romantic era Gothic) more often buries its narratives, leaving them deferred, unknowable, or irrelevant.

George Levine, expanding on the eponymous metaphor in *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*, writes that:

Part of the paradox of dying to know is, of course, that one cannot know anything when one is dead. The phrase implies, then, a kind of liminal position, at the edge of nonbeing, and it implies a persistent tragedy: only in death can one understand what it has meant to be alive.(13)

Levine is interested in a larger epistemological problem, but what is true of life is also true of narrative: once one knows what happens in a suspenseful novel, one has, by definition, already finished it. For example, in Catherine and Isabella's discussion of the black veil in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Catherine, after acknowledging that she is "wild to know" the secret of the veil, adds that she "would not be told on any account" and says "I should like to spend my whole life in reading [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*]."(14) Unlike the scientific experiment, the suspense of the Gothic novel often has no, or an unsatisfactory resolution. Catherine here is prescient, for as discussed above, the mystery of the black veil is famously disappointing. Revelation is irrelevant to suspense. In the Gothic roots of Victorian suspense we can see recurring structural devices that promote the atmospheric and the inconclusive, and minimize the importance of revelation and endings.

Following Eve Sedgwick, who identifies the Gothic by means of repeating structural and thematic elements, I wish to look at one of the defining motifs of the Gothic genre: live burial. The theme of being buried alive is a particularly central one in eighteenth-century Gothic literature, with its preponderance of crypts and dungeons. A live burial in a literal sense seems to occur in all of the major Gothic novels: for example, in *The Monk* (1796), Agnes is interred pregnant and ends up cradling the decaying body of her infant, while the other heroine, Antonia, is raped and killed in a crypt. In a large section of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) Monçada ends up interred in a dungeon. In America, too, Edgar Allan Poe's stories show a preoccupation with the theme, such as the imagined still-beating heart heard beneath the floorboards in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) or the narrator of "The Premature Burial" (1844), who is obsessively afraid of being buried alive. This fascination with live burial outlives the Gothic period, however. Chris Willis documents that the Victorians too had a preoccupation with being buried alive, and represented it frequently in fiction.(15) Live burial, Sedgwick argues, is a metaphor for writing in that it "recreate[s] parallel representations at a distance from the original, subject to more or less frightening distortions."(16) Furthermore, she argues that the recurrence of live burial in gothic plot coincides with the "live burial" of gothic narrative (stories within stories), and is related as well to the unspeakable in that both live burial and the unspeakable are thematically linked by the idea of a self unable to communicate. Likewise, Julian Wolfreys finds that texts themselves are both alive and dead at the same time because, even while archived, their life extends beyond their borders.(17)

The motif of live burial functions in a variety of ways in the texts I will be examining, and its various meanings point to the way the Gothic functions within Victorian suspense literature to suppress knowledge and narrative possibilities. Most obviously, and most often commented upon, is that live burial functions as a symbol of sexual repression, especially where it is associated with cloistering, as it is explicitly in both *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. At the same time, live burial is also associated with the violation or corruption of the body, as in the example of Agnes above, where her incarceration highlights decay without her death. Where the buried body is a woman (as it most frequently is, with a few notable exceptions) live burial is an ironic reversal of the resurrection, a connection made explicit in *Aurora Leigh*, but relevant as well in *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. While all of these ways of reading live burial are possible, my own focus on this figure of the buried-alive woman highlights the way it closes off narrative possibilities, problematizes the connection between the reader and the fictional world, and suggests that the true subject of representation is unknowable. The buried woman is unable to communicate, meaning that live burial involves in all cases a suppression or submersion of narrative voice or narrative possibilities, occasionally opening the way for others. To re-invoke George Levine's metaphor of dying to know, live burial exposes the necessary ending of a plot (in death) but in a way that precludes revelation. In this manner it promotes obscurity rather than epistemological certainty. By looking at the convention of metaphoric live burial in three Victorian texts that make use of the Gothic—*Villette*, Aurora Leigh, and *Lady Audley's Secret*—I intend to demonstrate how the Gothic

intervenes in otherwise realist texts to alert the reader to the suppression of truths or narrative possibilities.

Through the limited perspective of its narrator, *Villette* repeatedly withholds from the reader any promise of certain knowledge, marking it as a text much more interested in obscuration than revelation—even to the extent that the narrator denies closure to her readers, feigning an unwillingness to tell them the end of the story on its very last page. Numerous critics, beginning with Heilman, have noted the Gothic undercurrents in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. According to Mary Jacobus:

Supernatural haunting and satanic revolt, delusion and dream, disrupt a text which can give no formal recognition to either Romantic or Gothic modes. The buried letter of Romanticism becomes the discourse of the Other, as the novel's unconscious—not just Lucy's—struggles for articulation within the confines of mid-nineteenth-century realism. (122)(18)

In *Villette*, the complete internalization of the Gothic experience is a psychological one. Through the world of Lucy's imagination, the psychological and metaphorical levels of the text come together. Tony Tanner, in his reading of reality and shadow in Brontë's novel, finds the Gothic occurs in *Villette* to indicate moments of "epistemological unease"(61), and that the actual occurrences in the story, during which very little may happen, contrast at times sharply with the metaphorical language, which is rife with violence.(19) In fact *Villette* takes all of the Gothic thrills of *Jane Eyre* and moves them inside the skull of the heroine (where a lot of critics of the Gothic would say they belong). Just like Catherine Morland with her expectation of Gothic horrors, Lucy Snowe creates her own gloomy reality.

Although she disingenuously denies the sensibility of the traditional Gothic heroine, Lucy is extremely superstitious, as when she predicts the death of Miss Marchmont from a sound on the wind:

The wind was wailing at the windows: it had wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it took a new tone—an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear; a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust.
"Oh, hush! hush!" I said in my disturbed mind, dropping my work, and making a vain effort to stop my ears against that subtle, searching cry. I had heard that very voice ere this, and compulsory observation had forced on me a theory as to what it boded. Three times in the course of my life, events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm—this restless, hopeless cry—denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to live. Epidemic diseases, I believed, were often heralded by a gasping, sobbing, tormented, long-lamenting east wind. Hence, I inferred, arose the legend of the Banshee.(20)

Lucy's magical thinking demonstrates a self-centeredness that moves the great terrors and violence of more dramatic lives into the limited sphere of her own life. Here, she moves from reading for natural signs that might predict great disorder and upheaval ("epidemic diseases") to seeing these great omens as predicting her own sad, but hardly portentous tragedy: the death of the very elderly and infirm woman she works for. The omens in *Villette*, then, turn out to be predictors not of external changes and tragedies, but internal happenings.

In *Villette* the Gothic themes remain, but their application is mundane. In *Jane Eyre* Bertha Mason is locked in the attic. In *Villette* Lucy is also locked in the attic (with rats)—by M. Paul, who tells her, "'You will set me down as a species of tyrant and Blue-beard, starving women in a garret; whereas, after all, I am no such thing.'"(21) In Heilman's influential reading of the Gothic in Charlotte Brontë, he defines "new Gothic" as "that discovery of passion, that rehabilitation of the extra-rational, which is the historical

office of the Gothic, is no longer oriented in marvelous circumstance but moves deeply into the lesser known realities of human life."(22) Gothic becomes the psychological side of Brontë's creation: the exploration of internal states of being that gives depth to her mimetic world. But, for Heilman, Brontë reinvigorates a form that has no value before her. By making it compatible with realism, she makes it worthy. This creates a bifurcated reading, however, that I wish to avoid, tempering Heilman's disdain for the Gothic form with Susan Wolstenholme's insistence that Brontë "writes [Gothic] into a reinforcing juxtaposition—not a depreciative opposition—of 'realism' and 'romance.'"(23) And, as Alison Milbank points out, by ending her novels with a rational explanation of their supernatural elements, "Radcliffe had *already* undercut the marvelous in the interests of psychology."(24)

Both *Villette* and the eighteenth-century Gothic novel *The Monk* respond to anti-Catholic fears, an important feature of earlier Gothic work and one which is related to fears of live burial, as I will discuss. In the central plotline of *The Monk*, Ambrosio (the eponymous monk) fixates on the naïve young virgin Antonia, plans her ruin, and then in the end rapes and kills her. Although she never meets any murderous monks or nuns, in *Villette*, the staunchly Protestant Lucy Snowe is as fearful of Catholics as any true Gothic heroine should be. Although in the end, Père Silas turns out to be mendacious, most of the terror Lucy has of Catholics derives from the meaning they take on in her own mind. Although critics such as Schmitt and Rosemary Clark-Beattie have looked at Catholic stereotypes in *Villette*,(25) the use of hyperbole in Lucy's treatment of Catholicism throws *Villette*'s identity as an anti-Catholic novel into doubt. Lucy's terror of Catholicism is personal to her because it is motivated by her own attraction to the figure of the cloistered nun, who represents all of Lucy's own instincts towards burial and self-repression—the same instincts that lead her to withhold information from the reader.

Drawn in her unhappiness to go to confession, and having taken some comfort from the priest, Lucy responds to his invitation to meet with her again:

Did I, do you suppose, reader, contemplate venturing again within that worthy priest's reach? As soon should I have thought of walking into a Babylonian furnace. That priest had arms which could influence me; he was naturally kind, with a sentimental French kindness, to whose softness I knew myself not wholly impervious.(26)

Lucy's unreasonable terror in the face of a kind Catholic priest, her reference to the Babylonian furnace and her self-doubt show that what she fears most of all is that 'evil' is and can be seductive, and that she will submit to it rather than resist it. Unlike her literary predecessors, she is unlikely to be forcibly confined in a convent, (though the girls' ecole at which she teaches it itself convent-like), but she imagines herself in a convent all the same, "counting [her] beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard or Crécy in Villette."(27) There is an element of sexual desire that makes the priest figure more threatening. That Lucy, who is so anti-Catholic, would even go to confession in the first place, is indicative of her strange fixation on the faith.

As Toni Wein has also discovered, Brontë draws on Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, particularly the story of Beatrice de las Cisternas, otherwise known as the "Bleeding Nun."(28) In *The Monk*, the ghost of the nun comes into the story as Raymond and his lover Agnes are first plotting to run away together. Agnes plans to use the reputed ghost of the nun as a cover. She will disguise herself in a nun's garments and march out of the house along the route that the ghostly nun is said to walk, at the time she usually does her hauntings. (Susan Wolstenholme calls the courtship between Ginevra Fanshawe and De Hamal "a comic revision of the "Bleeding Nun" episode in *The Monk*.")(29) When Agnes can't make it, however, Raymond meets the actual ghost, and binds himself to her in an impromptu vow before he realizes his

mistake. Beginning that night, the ghostly nun visits Raymond between one and two in the morning, repeating his vow back to him. As part of spell, Raymond lies in bed immobilized for the hour:

In this attitude she remained for a whole long hour without speaking or moving; nor was I able to do either. At length the clock struck two. The apparition rose from her seat, and approached the side of the bed. She grasped with her icy fingers my hand, which hung lifeless upon the coverture, and, pressing her cold lips to mine, again repeated,
"Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine!
"Raymond! Raymond! I am thine!" &c.---
She then dropped my hand, quitted the chamber with slow steps, and the door closed after her. Till that moment the faculties of my body had been all suspended; those of my mind had alone been waking. The charm now ceased to operate; the blood which had been frozen in my veins rushed back to my heart with violence; I uttered a deep groan, and sunk lifeless upon my pillow.(30)

The same sequence repeats every night, and until Raymond, with the help of the Wandering Jew, can find a way to break the spell he falls into a depressed state.

The experience of night terrors and especially of lying awake unable to move, has been used to explain the myth of the incubus and succubus, demons who rape their victims while the victims are sleeping. This association of incubus/succubus with sleep paralysis can be seen in Henry Fuseli's 1782 painting *The Nightmare*, a Gothic favorite, which depicts the ghostlike horse of the title peering through the bed curtains at an unconscious woman with a demon sitting on her chest.(31) Like the succubus, the Bleeding Nun becomes a faux lover who paralyzes Raymond during her nightly visits: "The spectre again pressed her lips to mine, again touched me with her rotting fingers, and, as on her first appearance, quitted the chamber as soon as the clock told 'two.'" (173) (32)

Left alone at the boarding school while most of the other teachers and students have gone on break, Lucy has night terrors similar to Raymond's in the midst of a nine day illness:

By the clock of St. Jean Baptiste, that dream remained scarce fifteen minutes—a brief space, but sufficing to wring my whole frame with unknown anguish; to confer a nameless experience that had the hue, the mien, the terror, the very tone of a visitation from eternity. Between twelve and one that night a cup was forced to my lips, black, strong, strange, drawn from no well, but filled up seething from a bottomless and boundless sea. Suffering, brewed in temporal or calculable measure, and mixed for mortal lips, tastes not as this suffering tasted.(33)

Lucy's description of her dream is impossibly obscure. As such, it corresponds to Sedgwick's description of "the…half-submerged association that occurs in Gothic novels when a dream is, evidently casually, described as 'unspeakable,' or the past, equally casually, as 'buried.'"(34) As in Sedgwick's discussion of Thomas de Quincey, night-time paralysis is a form of being buried alive, which is the fear, or acknowledgement of the unspeakable, here materialized as Lucy's inability to convey what it is exactly that she dreams. Her "anguish" is "unknown," her experience is "nameless," and she does not say that her dream is a "visitation from eternity" but that it had the "mien" of one, and the suffering caused is not "calculable." Lucy purports to tell us the content of the dream, but her description is garbled and contradictory. For instance, Lucy tells us that her dream lasts fifteen minutes, but the "cup" she is forced to drink from lasts for an hour (just as it does for Lewis' Raymond).(35)

After her dream, Lucy is haunted by Gothic visions of corpses:

One evening—and I was not delirious: I was in my sane mind, I got up—I dressed myself, weak and shaking. The solitude and the stillness of the long dormitory could not be borne any longer; the ghastly white beds were turning into spectres—the coronal of each became a death's head, huge and sun-bleached—dead dreams of an elder world and a mightier race lay frozen in their wide and gaping eye-holes.(36)

It is this dream that causes her to go to the priest. Notably, however, Lucy does not tell us what she says to the priest, beyond "je suis Protestante." She tells him that she "had a pressure of affliction on [her] mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight," but denies that the affliction is a sin (even though in her description of her dream she describes her despair, which is a sin). As explanation, she says simply "I showed him the mere outline of my experience," but how she frames that experience, or if it is the same experiences she has been describing to the reader, she leaves us to imagine.(37) This elision has led Randa Helfield to observe that Lucy's confession is "a synecdoche of the entire novel. For in *Villette* Lucy Snowe simultaneously reveals and conceals herself and her story."(38) The Gothic tropes and metaphors throughout the novel, and particularly those related to being buried alive highlight the way in which the novel defies revelation.

More literally, the theme of live burial is introduced in the story of the nun "whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried, for some sin against her vow."(39) According to Crosby, Lucy and Paul "both are buried alive, like the nun"(40); Lucy, because of her cloistering within the school, and Paul, because of his submerged and buried passion for his childhood sweetheart, Justine Marie.

The fear of live burial recurs, under the same pear tree when, later in the novel, Lucy buries her letters from, and consequently her passion for, Graham Bretton, which Sedgwick also finds is a form of live burial: "For the letters are buried in just the same place, and in just the same way, as the erring nun of tradition."(41) Returning to the tree where she has buried the letters, she frets that she has been premature: "Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried. Sometimes I thought the tomb unquiet, and dreamed strangely of disturbed earth, and of hair, still golden and living, obtruded through coffin-chinks."(42) Graham is associated in Lucy's mind with life. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar link him to Apollo and the sun,(43) an apt figure here especially, where hope, represented by his golden hair, shines like sunshine through the holes in the coffin--her best effort to repress her attraction to him. In the end, he is too much alive for her burial—she can only minimize her affection for him, which at the end of the novel, she admits, like "the tent of Peri-Banou" could grow into "a tabernacle for a host."(44) Instead, her live burial of her feelings for him doesn't so much suppress those feelings as suppress the narrative possibilities that those feelings represent; the burial makes it impossible that *Villette* can further pursue any narrative about a courtship between Graham and Lucy.

Lucy herself is associated with death (and this polarity that must keep her apart from Graham). She describes him waiting to hear the result of his request to marry Paulina:

He was quite stirred up; his young hand trembled; a vital (I was going to write mortal, but such words ill apply to one all living like him)—a vital suspense now held, now hurried, his breath: in all this trouble his smile never faded.(45)

If indeed Graham's suspense is always a vital suspense, then Lucy Snowe's is a mortal suspense: Cassandra-like, she can only predict doom. This contrast between vital and mortal suspense also, in James

O'Rourke's reading of the biblical and angelic imagery in the text, expands the possibility of resolution beyond the lifespan:

Some angel will arrive, suspense will end, but its termination may not be an earthly fulfillment: "To how many maimed and mourning millions is the first and sole angel visitant, him easterns call Azrael"—the angel of death in Muslim theology. The deliverance from suspense can take two forms, each of which acquires an equivalent theological significance in Brontë's imagery: the fulfillment of sex-desire or death.(46)

Graham Bretton's suspense, like his fated place in life, is a romantic and therefore vital one, but Lucy sees herself as doomed. It is for this reason that we are able as readers to witness the novelistic unfolding of the courtship between Graham and Polly, but because Lucy's sense of suspense is more mortal than vital we are denied a novelistic resolution of the Lucy/ Paul relationship. Paul has promised to return to Lucy after three years away, managing an estate in the West Indies, but Lucy suggests, yet refuses to confirm, that he is killed when his returning ship sinks. Milbank writes "Brontë's imagination ultimately remains Gothic, in being jagged and ruined, unresolved, still only at trace with reason, wanting to escape from it, and not to collude in some tidy narrative ending."(47) Or rather, Lucy declines to speak the ending of the novel, which is not really ambiguous—no reader can be in doubt as to how the novel actually ends. Following the repeating imagery of live burial and under water scenes that runs through the entire novel, Lucy buries or sinks her narrative at the end of the novel. More important, even than her refusal to tell us about the death of Paul Emmanuel, is her refusal to tell us anything about the rest of her (long) life. She chooses instead to make the narrative of her own life end with the death of M. Paul (in her typical passive-aggressive way, she even ends by telling us about the futures of Madame Beck, Père Silas, and oddest of all, Madame Walravens, who isn't even a major character). The character who has spent most of her morbid imaginings drowning underwater or buried underground ends her own history with a sea burial that means a final simultaneous submerging of ship and narrative. Although Lucy's story ends, these themes of burial and submersion recur throughout the Victorian period.

It is a testament to the pervasiveness of the Gothic genre throughout the nineteenth century that we can even trace Gothic themes through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's classically inspired epic, *Aurora Leigh*. *Aurora Leigh* as a whole is more Bildungsroman than "dark Bildungsroman." However, critics have noted the presence of a variety of generic influences in the work. While much has been made of the classical tradition in *Aurora Leigh*, it also owes a significant debt to the Gothic novel, particularly in the poem's treatment of the character of Marian Erle.

Like a traditional Gothic heroine, Aurora struggles throughout the text to maintain her voice against her cousin Romney, who seeks to stifle, suppress, and discredit her poetry.(48) The fear of being silenced that Aurora struggles against becomes more gruesome and violent when she tells the story of Marian Erle. The Gothic is particularly evident in the sequence in which Marian describes to Aurora her flight from the planned marriage to Romney and her subsequent rape. Marian endures and embodies struggles and dangers to which Aurora is immune. The sequence in the poem that describes Marian Erle's flight from her marriage to Romney Leigh undermines the larger work's themes of Christian resurrection by replacing Christian iconography with a Gothic fixation on live burial.

Kathleen Renk examines the motif of live burial in *Aurora Leigh*, arguing that "*Aurora Leigh* claims that women are "buried alive" by society and that the way women are resurrected and society is transformed is through the attainment of a poetic vision of the seer."(49) However, although Renk calls attention to a number of times that Aurora herself is figuratively buried and resurrected, Linda Lewis has pointed out

that Marian Erle "never experiences the resurrection available to all other notable characters in the poem depicted as sometimes dead."(50) By refusing the resurrection that Aurora and Romney demand of her, Lewis argues that "Marian's insistence on her own unresurrected state seems to deny closure in a work where all other loose ends are neatly tied."(51)

While Aurora is able to achieve artistic vision by the poem's end, Marian becomes a shadow of Aurora's success as her rape creates for her a life in death that is characterized by dramatically reduced roles and constrained self-expression.

When Aurora finds Marian in Paris, she is living with her baby in a "room/ Scarce larger than a grave, and near as bare."(52) Marian figures her rape as a death: "I was not ever, as you say, seduced,/ But simply, murdered."(53) However, although Marian speaks of herself as being dead, she still walks, talks, breathes. Comparing herself to Christ, she describes: "The great red stone upon my sepulchre,/ Which angels were too weak to roll away."(54) A Christ who has not been resurrected, and a Christ who may perhaps be resurrected but is never freed from the tomb are, of course, different things, and suggest an especially gruesome interpretation of story of the Gospels.

Still, there is much death imagery that doesn't add to a Christian interpretation, but instead adds to a Gothic one. Marian describes how a corpse may be carried to a pauper's grave:

--then they leave it on the pit,
To sleep and find corruption, cheek to cheek
With him who stinks since Friday.
But suppose;
To go down half-dead, half-alive, I say,
And wake up with corruption,. cheek to cheek
With him who stinks since Friday! There it is,
And that's the horror of't, Miss Leigh.(55)

The vision of Christ's tombstone contends with the more macabre image of being buried alive, here in the pauper's grave, which Marian, a pauper herself, might come to expect. After she flees the scene of her rape, her disordered mind perceives gruesome Christ figures pursuing her ("every roadside Christ upon his cross/ Hung reddening through his gory wounds at me,/ And shook his nails in anger….)(56) Rather than being redemptive, these Christs merely accompany other types of living dead, the zombie-like trees that she flees from (zombies being another incarnation of the fear of being buried alive):

I went, by road and village, over tracts
Of open foreign country, large and strange,
Crossed everywhere by long thin poplar-lines
Like figures of some ghastly skeleton Hand
Through sunlight and through moonlight evermore
Pushed out from hell itself to pluck me back,
And resolute to get me, slow and sure.(57)

Because Marian is both dead and alive (the rape having figuratively killed her), Barrett Browning evokes the sepulchre of Christ, but her resurrection is not permitted. Marian lives on as a mother, but this is less a resurrection than it is a residue:

I'm not less dead for that: I'm nothing more
But just a mother. Only for the child,
I'm warm, and cold, and hungry, and afraid,
And smell the flowers a little, and see the sun,
And speak still, and am silent,--just for him!
I pray you therefore to mistake me not
And treat me, haply, as I were alive.(58)

While Aurora fears being silenced by an early marriage to Romney, Marian experiences a stripping of her identity as a function of rape, and her entire being is subsumed into motherhood–like Lewis' Agnes, giving birth in a crypt. Her pariah status is expressed by Aurora herself, who, before learning she is rape victim, condemns her viciously for her out-of-wedlock child. Though she is restored in Aurora's eyes, Marian nevertheless loses the ability or the desire to determine her own fate or make meaning of her life, and continues to exist in a state both living and dead. Marian expresses sexual corruption as the physical corruption of the body after death, and sees it as just as inevitable. Invoking the Gothic figure of the ghostly bride (like Beatrice de la Cisternas, the Bleeding Nun), in the last canto Marian tells Romney

Once killed,..this ghost of Marian loves no more,
No more..except the child!..no more at all.
I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead;
And now, she thinks I'll get up from my grave,
And wear my chin-cloth for a wedding-veil,
And glide along the churchyard like a bride,
While all the dead keep whispering through the withes,
'You would be better in your place with us,
'You pitiful corruption!'(59)

In a poem so concerned with a woman's self-definition, Marian finds herself in a very constrained role. Whereas Aurora reclaims her poetic voice and vision, Marian is a zombie mother, limited in her identity and her scope by rape. A perpetual madonna, her role is fixed in both society and the text itself.

Just as Lucy Snowe imagines that one can be buried alive in a convent as well as a crypt, so the sensation fiction of the 1860s picked up the idea of live burial in the lunatic asylum, a theme that occurs in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* among others. According to Willis, "The sensation fiction equivalent is internment in a lunatic asylum: a figurative rather than literal form of burial alive."(60) The doctor who questions Lady Audley at the end of *Lady Audley's Secret* makes this explicit: "If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations."(61) The novel contains two people who are buried alive: George Talboys, who is left to die in a well, and Lady Audley, who is "buried alive" in a lunatic asylum. Insistently tying live burial to the asylum and both burial and asylum to the cloister, the novel also figures this burial as an inability to communicate or persuade: those who are buried alive do not lose their lives, but they lose their ability to control the narrative.

Chapter titles throughout the novel reflect an obsession with live burial, even more insistently than the text itself, especially in the final third of the novel. Chapter ten in volume two, "Hidden in the Grave," has Robert Audley decrying the lack of peace and rest associated with the supposed death of his friend George as he looks at memorials in a church:

"If my poor friend, George Talboys, had died in my arms, and I had buried him in this quiet church, in one of the vaults over which I tread to-day, how much anguish of mind, vacillation, and torment I might have escaped,….I should have known his fate—I should have known his fate!"(62)

The contrast to the quiet dead in the church suggests that George is buried, but perhaps still suffering. Just as Raymond is haunted by the Bleeding Nun until he buries her bones in consecrated ground, Robert Audley worries, "What if he were henceforth to be haunted by the phantom of George Talboys?"(63) and becomes obsessed with the idea of burying him. The title of chapter eleven (volume two), "In the Lime Walk," refers to an avenue of lime, or linden trees, but also suggests the corrosive action of lime in burial (and thereby invokes ideas of bodily corruption and putrefaction). Other relevant chapter titles include "Preparing the Ground," (volume two, chapter twelve). Volume three, chapter six is entitled "Buried Alive," referring ostensibly to the fact that Lady Audley reveals at the end of the chapter that she has allowed George Talboys to be buried alive (in a well) but also referring to her own entombment in the institution.

The novel's final struggle between Robert and Lady Audley is over which of the two is "mad," for madness discredits their voice. Lady Audley's "secret" of the title is her madness, not that she has committed bigamy, or even murder: in a note to her father she writes "You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the secret which is the key to my life."(64) Lady Audley believes herself to be mad because her mother was, and as she frequently notes, madness is hereditary. The novel is ambiguous on the point. The doctor who examines her suggests that she is not, in fact, insane—that is just the way she rationalizes her own criminality. Despite the fact that she dramatically proclaims herself a "MADWOMAN!"(65) —in all capitals, she does not seem mad at all. As the doctor initially observes, "She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that."(66) In fact, what makes her so dangerous is that she is entirely rational, and it is this that makes her unsuitably feminine: without affection for her husband(s) or maternal attachment to her child, bigamy becomes a good way to game the system that awards status to women based on their husbands.

And so, it is Lady Audley who represents rationality, and Robert Audley who must act with subterfuge: in this case by burying her alive in a madhouse rather than going through the proper channels of the justice system. Doctor Mosgrave makes clear that a criminal trial would require more evidence: "no jury in the United Kingdom would condemn her upon such evidence as that," and furthermore, it would mean "exposure" and "*esclandre*."(67) Instead, by burying the story, it is kept out of the public eye and Lady Audley is silenced more effectively than she would be even were she tried, convicted, and condemned to capital punishment.

Just as in *Villette*, live burial is associated with Catholicism, which stands in for a Gothic past. Audley Court itself has Gothic/Catholic origins. Like the poor historical nun buried alive beneath the pear tree, Catholics have also been buried in the secret chambers of the Audley house, which contains

--a hiding place so small that he who hid there must have crouched on his hands and knees or lain at full length, and yet large enough to contain a quaint old carved oak chest half filled with priests' vestments which had been hidden away, no doubt, in those cruel days when the life of a man was in danger if he was discovered to have harboured a Roman Catholic priest, or to have had mass said in his house.(68)

Echoing numerous Gothic dungeons, the asylum to which Robert Audley takes Lady Audley used to be a monastery, and its crypt-like quality is evident in the description "the home which was to be her last upon

earth."(69) Though her room is well-appointed because of the family money, it nevertheless is "of a dismal and cellarlike darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funereal splendour which is not particularly conducive to the elevation of the spirits."(70) In case the reader misses the hint, Lady Audley reiterates "'You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley,' she cried; 'you have used your power cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave.'" Robert Audley retorts that what she sees as a living grave is "such a life as many a good and holy woman in this Catholic country freely takes upon herself and happily endures until the end."(71) According to Diana Peschier's study of anti-Catholicism of the period, the association of cloistering and mental asylum was widespread: "During the nineteenth century, the convent was closely associated with the asylum and actual mental hospitals in continental Europe were frequently identified as being managed by nuns"(72), (It is, in fact, in France that Lady Audley is imprisoned.) Robert Audley (a misogynist throughout the novel) associates cloistering with virtue in a restrictive feminine sphere, where Lady Audley associates it with burial. Madhouse, cloister and grave are all conflated.

With Lady Audley's burial, her narrative is concealed, but others are revealed. George Talboys, whose own narrative truth has been suppressed though most of the novel, is disinterred. In a strange gender reversal that continues to revisit the link between the cloister and the grave, whereas Lady Audley is imprisoned in an old monastery, George Talboys is left to die in an "old convent well,"(73) one where in times past "busy nuns have perhaps drawn the cool water with their own fair hands."(74) When he is thought dead, Robert Audley loses track of his story entirely. In another burial image, Robert Audley exclaims that it is "as if a trap-door had opened and in the solid earth, and let him through to the Antipodes,"(75) which is near being what happened, Talboys having sailed for Australia.

Previous critics of the Gothic generally and the Victorian Gothic specifically have made the argument that the Gothic is about irrationality and as such is a counter-argument to Victorian rationality, objectivity and empiricism. Critics such as Heilman began by making the point that Charlotte Brontë improves upon the rational, realistic novel by incorporating some of the irrational elements of the lower form of the Gothic. More recently, feminist critics such as Wolstenholme have accepted this argument in its basic form but responded by questioning Heilman's hierarchy, suggesting that the irrational nature of the popular form of the Gothic may not be necessarily subordinate to rational realism, and there is some sense in that critique. But it is not enough to simply flip the terms of the dichotomy and to suggest that the irrational is equally valuable to, or more valuable than, the rational. Instead, what I want to suggest is that in countering empirical representation, the Gothic genre questions the very ability of narrative to represent human experience, and in that sense it questions the realist project, even within that project. This inability is philosophical, psychological and social: Lucy Snowe is a woman buried alive inside her own head. Just as she is detached emotionally from those around her, she is also persistently unable to tell her reader what it is like to be Lucy Snowe---what her dream is, what her confession is, what the early tragedies of her life are, even though the entire novel is about her attempt to make narrative sense of these things. Even more than that, she is buried alive in the sense that she is a fictional character who can never cross the boundaries of the novel she exists in and the possibilities that that novel permits her, nor can we as readers cross those boundaries. In both *Aurora Leigh* and in *Lady Audley's Secret* narrative truth is exposed as social and (like in *Villette*) is affected by gender and social status. Aurora's struggle is to attain the artist's vision and the narrative control of her life and art. Her victory is her ability to see and represent reality as an artist, Marian's failure to write her own story shows that the other alternative is a living death, determined by others. Finally, *Lady Audley's Secret*, while it valorizes Robert Audley's interpretation of events over Lady Audley's, suggests a multiplicity of narratives and narrative possibilities in the way that it switches which characters are buried alive and which are allowed to speak (when George Talboys is

disinterred, and Lady Audley is silenced by being institutionalized), and in the ambiguity with which it treats the possibility of Lady Audley's madness.

The Gothic makes its influence felt in the Victorian period, not as an independent genre, but as the continuance of certain modes and conventions that permeate various genres. An analysis of the Victorian Gothic demonstrates that, rather than being separate from Victorian realism, it enters into Victorian realism in order to suggest unknowable possibilities and forces of suppression and repression. As in the figure of the person buried alive, this Gothic influence functions to suppress knowledge, narrative possibilities and the revelation of truths.

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1976, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986).
2. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986).
3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh, Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, eds. John Robert Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).
4. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).
5. According to George Levine, "As we shall see with Austen and Thackeray, much nineteenth-century realism defined itself against romance because that form implied wish fulfillment rather than reality." George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 9. Cannon Schmitt elaborates: "Like romance, of which indeed it has often been seen as a sub-category, the Gothic was for much of the nineteenth century the feminized and derided antithesis of the realist novel" Cannon Schmitt, *Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), 7. Gothic novels, according to George E. Haggerty, despite some weaknesses, "achieve a generic revolution that changes the course of the history of fiction." George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1989), 4.
6. See, for example, Elizabeth Napier, *The Failure of the Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-Century Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987).
7. Schmitt, 6.
8. See Laurence Talairach, 'Behind the Scenes of Women's Beauty Parlours: From Gothicism to Sensationalism' in *Victorian Gothic*, eds. Karen Sayer and Rosemary Mitchell (Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2003), 124-140, Kathleen Spencer, "Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis" in *ELH* 59 (1992), and Richard D. Altick, *Deadly Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).
9. Carol Margaret Davison, "The Ghost of Genres Past: Theorizing the Gothic in the Victorian Novel" in *Victorian Gothic*, eds. Karen Sayer and Rosemary Mitchell (Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2003), 24.
10. Haggerty, 8, 6.
11. Robert B. Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic" i*n From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad: Notes Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse*, eds. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (St. Paul: U of Minnesota, 1958), 118-132. 131-2.
12. Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Dou*bt (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2003), 52.
13. George Levine, *Dying to Know : Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002), 2.
14. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Claire Grogan (Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 1996), 62.
15. Chris Willis, "A House for the Dead: Victorian Mausolea and Graveyard Gothic," *Victorian Gothic*, Eds. Karen Sayer and Rosemary Mitchell (Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2003): 155-165.
16. Sedgewick, 63.
17. Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xi.
18. Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in Villette." 1986, reprinted in *New Casebooks: Villette*, ed. Pauline Nestor (New York: St. Martin's P, 1992).
19. Tony Tanner, "Substance and Shadow: Reading Reality in Villette," 1979, Reprinted in *New Casebooks: Villette*, Ed. Pauline Nestor (New York: St. Martin's P, 1992), 61, 64.
20. Brontë, 35.
21. Ibid., 129.
22. Heilman, 123.

23. Susan Wolstenholme, *Gothic (Re)Visions: Writing Women as Readers* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1993), 58.
24. Alison Milbank, "The Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 153.
25. Rosemary Clark-Beattie, "Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of Villette," *ELH* 53 (1986): 821-847.
26. Brontë, 154.
27. Ibid., 155.
28. Toni Wein, "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's Villette" in *SEL: Studies in English Literature*, 39 (1999), 733-46.
29. Wolstenholme, 72.
30. Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk*, 1796, (New York: Grove P, 1952), 171.
31. See Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
32. Ibid., 173.
33. Brontë, 151.
34. Sedgwick, 52.
35. As Christina Crosby points out, Lucy will later, in her attack on the empty habit that lays upon her bed, refer to the nun as an "incubus." Brontë, 451. Christina Crosby, "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text" in *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24, 4 (1984), 708.
36. Brontë, 152.
37. Ibid., 153.
38. Randa Helfield, "Confession as Cover-Up in Brontë's Villette" in *English Studies in Canada*, 23 (1997), 59.
39. Brontë, 99.
40. Crosby, 711.
41. Sedgwick, 130.
42. Brontë, 347.
43. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 412.
44. Brontë, 439.
45. Ibid., 416.
46. James O'Rourke, *Sex, Lies, and Autobiography: The Ethics of Confession* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2006), 156.
47. Milbank, 157.
48. According to the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, "The condition for Aurora's marriage which Barrett Browning sets in her narrative is that she retain her position as speaking subject." The Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective. "Women's Writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*," excerpted in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G.K. & Hall, 1999), 102-111, 108.
49. Kathleen Renk, "Resurrecting the Living Dead: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetic Vision in *Aurora Leigh*" in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 23 (2000 May), 40-49, 40.
50. Linda M. Lewis, "Rape and Resurrection in Aurora Leigh," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 19 (1991), 56-65, 56.
51. Ibid., 60.
52. Barrett Browning, 6.551-22.
53. Ibid., 6.769-770.
54. Barrett Browning, 6.1272-3.

55. Ibid., 6.1195-1202.
56. Ibid., 6.1246-1248.
57. Ibid., 6.1239-1245.
58. Ibid., 6.822-828.
59. Ibid., 9.389-396.
60. Willis, 160.
61. Braddon, 381.
62. Ibid., 256.
63. Ibid., 402.
64. Ibid., 250.
65. Ibid., 345.
66. Ibid., 377.
67. Ibid., 379-80.
68. Ibid., 3.
69. Ibid., 385.
70. Ibid., 388.
71. Ibid., 391.
72. Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 164.
73. Braddon, 395.
74. Ibid., 4.
75. Ibid., 151.